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Unveiling and Veiling in Modern Arabic Literature: Writers' Positions between Support, Opposition, and Ambivalence

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Abstract:

This study explores the controversial issue of unveiling in modern Arabic literature by examining the views of a wide range of prominent writers. Using a comparative textual analysis of literary works—particularly poetry and essays—the study classifies authors into three groups: supporters of unveiling, opponents, and those with ambivalent or evolving positions. Advocates such as Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi and Ma'ruf al-Rusafi viewed the veil as a social constraint rather than a religious imperative, while opponents like Mustafa Sadiq al-Rafi'i and Ahmad Muharram considered veiling a safeguard for morality and social stability. Meanwhile, poets like Ahmad Shawqi and Hafiz Ibrahim expressed a desire for social reform while hesitating to endorse complete departure from tradition. The study contributes to our understanding of the ideological struggles between tradition and modernity in the Arab world, revealing how literature functioned as a platform for negotiating social transformation, gender roles, and cultural identity. It highlights the role of modern Arabic literature not only as a mirror of social debate but also as a rhetorical and political tool in shaping public consciousness.

Keywords: unveiling, veiling, women, modern Arabic literature, social transformation, Western modernity, modern Arabic poetry.

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Introduction:

The issue of women's unveiling (*sufūr*) has long been a source of heated societal debate across numerous Islamic countries—including Egypt, the Levant, Iraq, the Maghreb, and others. It is a persistent and recurring topic: sometimes it fades into the background, only to resurface with renewed intensity. Some nations have moved beyond it, while others continue to engage with it. Unveiling is one among many issues that revolve around the Muslim woman—her identity, personality, and the limits placed upon her in matters such as dress, employment, driving, sports, and other domains. Some argue that raising and debating such topics is a form of advocating for women's rights and redressing longstanding injustices. I, too, believe that examining women's issues is necessary and that some of their rights have indeed been diminished. I do not defend certain erroneous practices that have led to the marginalization of women, nor do I support the glorification of traditions that deem her inferior, burden her with unnatural expectations, deny her the right to choose her spouse, and subject her to other forms of injustice condemned by both Islamic law and sound human nature.

However, the overamplification of women's issues—and their insertion into every minor and major societal debate—has become a habit for some intellectuals and thinkers who, in their advocacy, have often outpaced women themselves in championing feminist causes. As a result, a kind of intellectual battleground emerged: one that pits the "modern, progressive woman" against the "traditional, backward one." As Dr. Muḥammad Ḥusayn observed:

> The woman was the most prominent and contentious of these topics, largely due to the vast differences between Muslims and Westerners concerning traditions and customs related to women—differences so deep that no reconciliation seems possible unless one worldview completely erases the other. (Ḥusayn, 1968, vol. 2, p. 248)

Critics such as Dr. Saʿīd Benkrād (Bengrad) approach the topic through semiotics and the study of cultural codes. In his book *Wahj al-Maʿānī*, Benkrād attempts a critical reading of the veil (*ḥijāb*) and its cultural implications—while intentionally steering clear of religious rulings. In one of the book's chapters, he asks whether the veil is a *religious necessity or a patriarchal imposition*. His language is filled with ambiguity and unease, as seen in statements like: *"*A considerable portion of Muslim men and women in this country do not view the veil as a religious obligation. Often, it is seen as an ideological act driven by social needs rather than by religious prescription."

And again:

> Despite a massive arsenal of fatwas—replete with warnings and promises, exaltations of piety, and fears of the hereafter—jurists from all directions have failed to convince women to abandon what has become a central component of their public identity. Depending on the context, the veil has morphed from a clear religious symbol into a mask for deception—one that conceals a body vulnerable to all manner of desire." (Bengrad, 2013, p. 18)

The obsession with unveiling is often only the first step down a longer path: it begins with revealing the face and ends with removing nearly all clothing save what barely covers the intimate parts. The consequence is the erosion of modesty, the spread of moral corruption, and the collapse of values. A heightened sexual culture emerges, and young people of both genders become increasingly preoccupied with their desires, like a snowball gaining size and speed. In such an environment, hearts lose their ambition, and people abandon meaningful endeavors, innovation, and progress.

Ironically, the very West that many of our intellectuals idealize has begun to realize the humiliation endured by modern women in their own societies. The West is waking up to the reality that so-called "liberation" has often been a tool to exploit women, drive them away from their natural strengths, and exhaust them in roles ill-suited to their nature. As Pierre Daco writes:

> Never before has the woman been so crushed, depleted, and lifeless as she is today. Our age is witnessing the most degrading exploitation in the history of women. Appearances are deceiving. The trap is beautifully disguised... The bait was irresistible, and the fish were hungry—one cast of the hook was all it took. (Pierre Dākū, 1983, p. 17)

In Egypt, for instance, the issue of "women's liberation" occupied scholarly, religious, literary, and social circles for decades. Early signs of this debate appeared in Rifāʿa al-Ṭahṭāwī's (d. 1873) travelogue *Takhlīṣ al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz*. Later, Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) gently touched on the issue in his writings. But it was Qāsim Amīn (d. 1908) who caused an uproar with his books *Taḥrīr al-Marʾa* (1899) and *al-Marʾa al-Jadīda* (1900), which generated widespread backlash (Muḥammad Ḥusayn, 1978, pp. 202–203)

We are not here to rehash the entirety of that long and complex debate—it has already been dissected by scholars and thinkers in legal, rational, and philosophical terms. In fact, it's said that more than 100 books were written in response to Qāsim Amīn's ideas (ʿAbd Allāh Al-Dāwūd, n.d, pp. 9–10).

Rather, our interest lies in exploring how literature—through its various forms—engages with this issue, and how it has shaped public consciousness, challenged prevailing norms, and influenced moral and cultural debates. We ask: to what extent has literature functioned as a tool for persuasion, social mobilization, ideological struggle, or the defense of tradition?

In analyzing the discourse around unveiling in modern Arabic literature, we aim to assess the power of literary influence in Arab societies, and how writers have used literature as a vehicle for reform or destruction, either reinforcing or subverting societal values. Our study situates this literary engagement within the broader ideological battle between proponents of Westernization and defenders of tradition and authenticity.

Research Rationale

This study has been undertaken due to the significance of the issue of *sufūr* (unveiling) and *ḥijāb* (veiling), which represents a deeply rooted societal matter with cultural and religious dimensions that have profoundly influenced the transformations within Arab society in the modern era. The research aims to explore the positions of writers and poets who lived through a time of major upheavals in the history of the Arab

world—such as colonial influences, national movements, and social and political changes—and how these transformations were reflected in their literary works.

Moreover, the study sheds light on the hesitation and confusion experienced by some authors regarding women's issues. Their stances ranged from strict advocacy for the *ḥijāb* to calls for various forms of liberation. This contrast offers a deeper understanding of the literary positions during that period. The research also examines the impact of European thought and Western modernity on Arab intellectual life, analyzing how writers engaged with these new cultural currents while remaining rooted in traditional values.

Studying these perspectives contributes to a broader understanding of the interplay between literature, politics, and society, and reveals how debates around *ḥijāb* and *sufūr* played a role in shaping the identity of the Arab woman in that historical context. Additionally, it highlights the intellectual diversity of Arabic literature and its impact on societal change.

Research Methodology

This study adopts the critical literary analysis method, which focuses on examining and interpreting literary texts to understand how writers addressed themes such as *sufūr* (unveiling). The methodology includes the following components:

1. **Literary Content Analysis**: This involves a close reading of literary texts—poetry, prose, and intellectual writings—that engaged with the topic of *sufūr*, aiming to extract the authors' perspectives and ideological inclinations.
2. **Contextual Analysis**: The study considers the historical and social context in which these texts were produced, exploring how such circumstances influenced various attitudes toward *sufūr*. This includes examining the role of reformist movements and the broader social conditions in the Arab world during that period.
3. **Comparative Method**: The research compares the views of writers from diverse ideological backgrounds on the issue of *sufūr*, highlighting both the similarities and differences in their visions. This comparative approach enables a deeper understanding of the intellectual diversity within modern Arabic literature.
4. **Historical Method**: The study traces the evolution of the idea of *sufūr* in modern Arabic literature, linking literary representations to the political and social events that shaped writers' and society's perceptions of *ḥijāb* and freedom.

By integrating these approaches, the research provides a comprehensive and objective analysis of how modern Arabic literature has treated the theme of *sufūr*, contributing to a clearer understanding of how literature has influenced public opinion on vital societal issues such as the role and status of women.

Research Question

This study seeks to answer the following central question:

How did modern Arab writers address the issue of sufūr (unveiling) in their literary works, and what were the social, cultural, and political dimensions that influenced their treatment of this theme?

Through this inquiry, the research aims to explore how writers expressed their views on *sufūr*, analyzing the literary techniques they employed to present varying stances on the issue. The study will particularly focus on how post-World War II social, political, and cultural contexts shaped these literary expressions and attitudes.

***Sufūr* and *Ḥijāb* in Classical Arabic Literary Heritage**

The Linguistic Origin of *Sufūr*

In classical Arabic literary heritage, the term *sufūr* appears with the same general meaning it holds today. Al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 791 CE) defines it in his seminal lexicon *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*: "*Al-sufūr*: when a woman removes her *niqāb* (face veil) from her face; she is then *sāfir*, and they (plural) are *sawāfir*" (Al-Farāhīdī, n.d., 2:251.)

To illustrate this usage, he cites the poet Tawbah ibn al-Ḥumayyir al-Khufājī, who writes in a *ṭawīl* meter:

(Wa kuntu idhā mā ji'tu Laylā tabarraqat
Faqad rābanī minhā al-ghadāta sufūruhā)

And when I came to Laylā and she veiled her face,
It troubled me that morning—her unveiling trace

Here, *sufūr* stands in direct contrast to *ḥijāb*—the two are opposites that cannot coexist. Throughout the classical tradition, women were often praised for modesty and veiling, while revealing one's face (*isfār*) was generally seen as unbecoming or improper.

Dr. Yaḥyā al-Jubūrī, in his book *Al-Malābis al-Jāhilīyah fī al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī* (*Pre-Islamic Clothing in Jāhilī Poetry*), documents several garments worn by women for veiling in the Jāhilīyah period, such as the *khimār*, *burquʿ*, and *khifā'*—the latter being a cloak worn over the bridal gown to conceal it. In essence, any item that conceals is categorized as *khifā'*(Al-Jubūrī, 1989, p. 118).

Interestingly, the title *Dhū al-Khimār* ("he of the veil") was given to some Jāhilī figures. For example, ʿAwf ibn al-Rabīʿ earned this title after fighting valiantly in his wife's *khimār* during battle—his enemies mocked him with this epithet. (Al-Fayrūzābādī, 2005, 2:23–24, s.v. *"khamara."*)

Hind bint Ṣaʿṣaʿah was also called *Dhāt al-Khimār* ("she of the veil") because she removed her veil and boasted: "Who among the Arab women has four men like my four? It is fitting that I remove my veil in their presence—my father Ṣaʿṣaʿah, my brother Ghālib, my uncle al-Aqraʿ, and my husband al-Zibrqān ibn Badr"(Abū ʿUbaydah Maʿmar ibn al-Muthannā, 1905–1912, p. 264.)

The poet al-Nābighah al-Dhubyānī (d. 605 CE) emphasizes feminine modesty and a woman's instinct to veil herself before strangers. In one poem, he recounts surprising a young woman; she reflexively pulls her *khimār* over her face and shields herself with her wrist or palm. He captures this moment with masterful poetic flair in *kāmil* meter:

Saqaṭa al-naṣīfu wa lam turid isqāṭah
Fatanāwalat-hu wa-ittaqatnā bi-l-yadi

Her veil slipped down—she had not meant it so,
She caught it fast, shielding me with her hand's glow.

Bi-mukhaḍḍabin rakhsin ka-anna banānahā
ʿAnamun yakādu min al-laṭāfati yuʿqadi

With hennaed fingers, soft as silken thread,
So fine they seemed a web too light to spread.
(Al-Dhubyānī, 1985, p. 93.)

In similar fashion, the *qināʿ* (face covering) often serves in Jāhilī poetry as a metaphor for feminine concealment. ʿUrwah ibn al-Ward al-ʿAbsī (d. 607 CE) expresses this notion in *ṭawīl* meter:

Firāshī firāshu al-ḍayfi wa-al-baytu baytuhu
Wa lam yalhinī ʿanhu ghazālun muqannaʿu

My guest lies where I lay, my home is his own,
Not even a veiled gazelle could draw me from him alone.
(Ibn al-Ward, 1966, p. 68.)

When a woman maintains her *khimār*, preserves her chastity, and upholds her modesty, she becomes a source of admiration and poetic praise. Al-Shanfarā (Thābit ibn Aws, d. 525 CE), in a famous *ṭawīl* line, states:

Laqad aʿjabatnī lā suqūṭan qināʿuhā
Idhā mā mashat wa-lā bi-dhāti taluffuti

She pleased me not for slipping veil or flirted glance,
But for her steady walk—no coquette's dance.
(Al-Shanfarā 1983, p. 109.)

This meaning is affirmed by Durayd ibn al-Ṣimmah (d. 6th century CE) in his verse [*ṭawīl* meter]:

wa-min ḥayiyātin lam yaqadna bi-khimrihā
ilā al-dawḥi wa-lam yamshayna mashya al-muʿabbadī

Among modest women—never is her veil cast,
Nor does she walk as though from chains unfast.
(Ibn al-Ṣimmah, 1985, p. 58.)

When a woman becomes lax in observing her *ḥijāb* (veil/modesty), and reveals her beauty, it awakens temptation in the heart of the man. Desire pulls him in, and he drowns in a sea of fantasies and illusions. At this juncture, the phrase *maylāʾ al-khimār* ("the one with a tilted veil") is used to depict this alluring type of woman, as seen in the verse by Jirān al-ʿAwḍ al-Numayrī (ʿĀmir ibn al-Ḥārith, d. unknown) [*ṭawīl* meter]:

wa-fī al-hiyyi maylāʾu al-khimāri ka-annahā
fatātu himānin fī ridāʾin muqalladi

In the lane there lives one with a swaying veil,
Like silk in the wind, so light and frail.

shamsun min al-shubbāni tuʾnisu qalbahā
qatūlu tamannīn law anna taḥammadī

A sun of youth whose smile ignites the air,
A slayer of hearts, if fate would dare.
(Al-Numayrī, 1931, p. 15.)

In the Sacred Mosque (*al-Masjid al-Ḥarām*), as women circumambulate the Kaʿbah—the holiest of sites—surrounded by pilgrims and worshipers, one finds a striking image of feminine chastity and steadfast commitment to modesty. Even in this place, where most Muslims find no space for frivolity, the awe of the location, the sanctity of worship, and the multiplied weight of sin veil the frivolous—except for the man whose inner sight has been blinded and heart sealed.

Consider the words of al-Ḥārith ibn Khālid al-Makhzūmī (d. 699 CE), who described women making tawāf around the Kaʿbah, their veils tilting from exhaustion [*kāmil* meter]:

yuṭawifna bayna al-rukni wa-l-makāni wa-yasʿa
hawāhunna daʿnā wa-l-hawā mataʿu.

They halted mid-circumambulation slow,
Then pressed ahead with weary, heavy flow.

fa-lammā qaḍawna al-jawla sabʿan wa-ʿaqqadū
ʿadūdahum kānū ka-khamri al-zarāʾibu.

Their seventh round they barely could fulfill—
Their waists like wineskins swaying, soft and still.
(Ibn Ṭayfūr, n.d., p. 178.)

A more commercially charged incident comes from Miskīn al-Dārimī (Rabīʿah ibn ʿĀmir al-Tamīmī, d. 708 CE), who helped a Kūfan merchant sell black veils (*khimār aswad*) in Madinah. The merchant had sold all his veils except the black ones. When he sought Miskīn's help—who had turned to piety and renounced poetry and song—Miskīn reassured him, saying, "Do not worry. I will help you sell them all, God willing." Then he composed these verses [kāmil meter]:

qul lil-jamīli fī khimārin aswadi
mā faʿalti bi-l-ʿābid al-mutahajjidi

Say to the girl in the veil so black:
"What have you done to one on the spiritual track?"

qad kāna shammara li-l-ṣalāti thawbahū
ḥattā naqaltihi bi-bābi al-masjidi

He had readied his robe for night-time prayer,
Till you appeared with your face so fair.

ruddī ʿalayhi ṣiyāmahu wa-ṣalātahu
lā taqtulīhi bi-dīni Muḥammadi

Return his fasts, his prayers, his creed—
Do not slay him for Muḥammad's deed!"
(Al-Qurṭubī, 2008, vol. 1, p. 560.)

Miskīn's lines became famous, and no woman in Madinah remained without purchasing one of those black veils. Thanks to his verse, the merchant sold out entirely. Miskīn had succeeded in launching what we might call today a "marketing campaign" for the black veil—akin to modern commercial advertisements costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. Through poetry, he turned the veil into a symbol of beauty and modesty, presenting the pious man as distracted from worship by a veiled woman at the mosque door.

These poetic testimonies—and many others—affirm that the Arabs knew and practiced *ḥijāb* even before Islam. "Perhaps," writes Muḥammad Ismāʿīl Al-Muqaddim, "this was a remnant of the tolerant ḥanīfiyyah [primordial monotheism] inherited from the faith of Abraham, just as they inherited circumcision (*khiṭān*), the sacrificial *ʿaqīqah*, and other rites" (Al-Muqaddim, 2007, vol. 3, p. 78).

This reflects the natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) of women toward modesty, chastity, and concealment. The Arabs even coined the proverb: *"al-mawt al-fādiḥ khayr min al-zayy al-fāḍiḥ"*—"A disgraceful death is better than a scandalous dress" (Al-Tawḥīdī, n.d., p. 256.)

This does not mean that wanton display (*tabarruj*) was completely absent from those times. Alongside *ḥijāb*, various forms of unveiling existed. The Qurʾān itself cautions: *"And do not display yourselves as was the display of the former Jāhiliyyah"* (Qurʾān, *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* 33:33). Al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 AH / 1273 CE) comments: "This refers to their way of walking with sway and flirtation—hence God forbade them from such behavior."

This brief survey and quick glance into the history of *ḥijāb* in early Arabic tradition confirms that woman, by her very nature, gravitates toward modesty, decency, and veiling her charms. Poets and writers employed the motif of the veil according to their perspectives—at times imagining what lies behind it, at others seeking its fall, or seizing the moment when it tilts to catch an illicit glance. Frequently, they praised the woman's chastity, her head-cover, and her seclusion within her tent.

In the modern era, we continue to see literary debates ignited by this ever-renewing social issue. I hope to explore this topic further—to trace how literature, in its various genres, possesses the power to influence, transform, and persuade.

This swift survey has explored the concepts of *sufūr* (unveiling) and *ḥijāb* in early Arabic literary heritage. The findings reveal that *sufūr* was indeed viewed as the antithesis of *ḥijāb*, which symbolized modesty and virtue. Poets employed the veil as a metaphor for a woman's honor, while the uncovering of her face was often the subject of critique. Writers and poets projected diverse attitudes—some explored what lay hidden behind the veil, others praised the veil itself. It becomes clear that *ḥijāb* was part of Arab culture even before Islam, connected deeply to notions of virtue and self-respect. To this day, the literary and social discourse around *ḥijāb* remains potent and influential in shaping public thought and cultural identity.

Literary Stances on *Sufūr* in Modern Arabic Literature

This section does not aim to delve into the intellectual and religious battles that raged between proponents and opponents of *sufūr* (women's unveiling) in various Muslim countries. Many scholars, thinkers, and historians have already explored the phenomenon, documented its evidence, and highlighted the cultural and theological resources marshaled by each side to defend its stance. For example, Muḥammad al-Muqaddim's *ʿAwdat al-Ḥijāb*, Muṣṭafā Ṣabrī's *Qawlī fī al-Marʾah*, and Marqus Fahmī's *al-Marʾah fī al-Sharq* offer influential yet contrasting perspectives on the role of women in Islamic and Arab societies. Similarly, works like Iḥsān al-Amīn's *al-Marʾah: Azmat al-Huwiyyah wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-Mustaqbal*, Jābir ʿAṣfūr's *Difāʿan ʿan al-Marʾah* (2007),

and Muḥammad ʿImārah's *al-Taḥrīr al-Islāmī li-l-Marʾah* present varied ideological responses to modernity and gender discourse. Additional contributions such as Zaynab Riḍwān's *al-Marʾah bayna al-Murūth wa-l-Taḥdīth* and Fuʾād al-ʿAbd al-Karīm's *al-ʿUdwān ʿalā al-Marʾah fī al-Muʾtamarāt al-Duwaliyyah* further reflect the diversity of views surrounding the status, representation, and rights of women in contemporary Arab thought.In 1915, *al-Dustūr* magazine was established as part of this broader sociopolitical dialogue.

What concerns us here, however, is a more focused literary examination: identifying modern Arab writers and poets who took part in the *sufūr* debate using literature—emotion-laden, persuasive, and rooted in personal and social feeling—as their mode of expression. The question arises: did literature play an active role in shaping public consciousness on this issue, and if so, how? Was the literary presence in this debate descriptive and neutral, or was it actively mobilized to advocate for one side?

Upon examining the modern Arabic literary corpus, three distinct orientations emerge regarding the contentious issue of *sufūr* (women's unveiling). These literary stances reflect not only ideological positions but also broader sociopolitical and cultural anxieties that permeated Arab societies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

First, there exists a group of writers and poets who enthusiastically embraced *sufūr*, viewing it as a necessary step toward individual liberty, gender equality, and societal progress. These authors challenged entrenched customs and cultural norms, often portraying the *ḥijāb* not as a religious mandate but as a symbol of patriarchal control and intellectual stagnation. Their literary output—ranging from impassioned poetry to polemical essays—sought to dismantle what they perceived as antiquated modes of thought that impeded women's full participation in public life. Some modern scholars have labeled this trend as representative of the *Sufūriyyūn* (the pro-unveiling faction). A notable case study of this perspective is presented in *al-Ghāwūn* magazine (Al-Khabbāz, 2009), where Muḥammad al-Khabbāz critically examines the work of Iraqi poet Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī, one of the most vocal advocates for *sufūr*.

Second, a contrasting literary current consists of writers who adamantly opposed *sufūr*, regarding the veil as a religious obligation, a moral safeguard, and a cultural anchor that preserves social cohesion. These authors often framed their arguments in religious, ethical, and historical terms, seeking to refute the claims of modernists and reformers. For them, the removal of the veil was not an act of liberation but a symptom of moral decline and cultural capitulation to Western values. Their literary works—often didactic in tone—aimed to defend the Islamic heritage and the centrality of *ḥijāb* in maintaining societal decency and feminine dignity.

Third, there is a category of writers who adopted a more ambivalent or moderate stance, vacillating between the arguments of both camps. These figures frequently refrained from making absolute pronouncements, preferring instead to explore the complexities of the issue through reflective or allegorical writing. Some of them left the resolution of the *sufūr–ḥijāb* debate to the evolving values of society or the unfolding course of time. In their works, one often detects a tone of hesitation, ambiguity, or even contradiction—an indication of the internal conflict and ideological uncertainty that characterized their views.

Together, these three literary stances capture the rich diversity of opinion and the dynamic intellectual environment in which the veil—whether as a garment or as a symbol—was fiercely debated. Far from being a marginal issue, *sufūr* emerged as a central literary and cultural motif, enabling writers to interrogate broader themes of identity, modernity, faith, and freedom.

Among the most enthusiastic literary supporters of *sufūr* was the Iraqi poet Jamīl Ṣidqī Al-Zahāwī (d. 1936), who advocated for women's liberation and the removal of the veil with poetic boldness. In his *Dīwān*, he describes the poet as a free spirit who must not fear the criticism of the masses and must strive to tear down outdated customs: "The free poet is courageous, fearing not the blame of the blamers...

He seeks every day to tear away the tatters of tradition" (Al-Zahāwī, 1955).

In one of his most famous poems, published in *al-Balāgh* magazine on August 26, 1927, under the signature "*al-Shāʿir al-Ṣaghīr*," Al-Zahāwī writes [*al-khafīf* meter]:

mazziqī yā bint al-ʿIrāq al-ḥijāba
wasfirī fa-l-ḥayātu tabghī inqilāba.

Tear off your veil, O daughter of Iraq—
Reveal your face and spark a social shock.

mazziqīhi waḥriqīhi bilā raythin
faqad kāna ḥārisan kadhdhāba.

Burn it down without a thought or sigh,
A lying guard—it's time to say goodbye.

mazziqīhi wa-baʿda dhālika Aydan
mazziqīhi ḥattā yakūna habāba.

Tear it again, again, without delay—
Till nothing but its ashes blow away.

In another poem, he argues for *sufūr* as a social and intellectual necessity:

qāla: hal bi-l-sufūri nafʿun yurajjā?
qultu: khayrun mina al-ḥijābi al-sufūru

He asked me: "Is unveiling any good?"
I said: "It's better than veils ever could."

innamā fī al-ḥijābi shallun li-shaʿbin
wa-khafāʾun wa-fī al-sufūri ẓuhūru

The veil dulls minds and dims the sight,
While sufūr brings wisdom into light.

kayfa yasmū ilā al-ḥaḍārati shaʿbun
minhu niṣfun ʿan niṣfin mastūru

Can progress rise in any land,
If half its people are unmanned?
(al-Zahāwī, vol. 1, p. 720)

In his poem *Asfirī*, al-Zahāwī directly calls upon the women of Iraq to cast off inherited customs and embrace modern civilization:

asfirī fa-l-ḥijābu yā bint Fihri
huwa dāʾun fī al-ijtimāʿi wakhīm.

Unveil, O daughter of *Fihr*, with pride—
The veil's a plague we must not abide

kullu shayʾin ilā al-tajaddudi māḍin
fa-limādhā yuqirru hādhā al-qadīm?

All things move on, transform and grow,
Why should the veil still block the flow?

asfirī fa-l-sufūru li-l-nāsi ṣubḥun
zāhirun wa-l-ḥijābu laylun bahīm.

Unveiling brings the morning's cheer,
While veils are nights devoid of clear.

lam yaqul fī al-ḥijābi fī shaklihi hādhā nabiyyun
wa-lā irtaḍāhu ḥakīm

No Prophet endorsed it in this design—
Nor wise man claimed it was divine.

(Ṭabbāna, 1997)

Al-Zahāwī reinforces his position in *Mā fī al-sufūr maʿarrah*, where he insists that virtue is internal, not in the veil:

mā fī al-sufūri maʿarratun
tukhshā ʿalā imraʾatin ʿafīfah

There is no shame in open grace,
If virtue lights the woman's face.

inna al-naẓīfah fī qarārati
nafsihā tabqā naẓīfah

Clean hearts remain so, come what may—
No veil can teach or hide the way.
(Al-Zahāwī, Vol. 1:714 1955)

In *ʿAzaw al-ḥijāb ilā kitāb*, he critiques those who misinterpret scripture to justify veiling:

ʿazaw al-ḥijāba ilā kitābin
fa-laytahum qaraʾū al-kitāba

They linked the veil to sacred text,
But never read what the verse expects.

inna al-taʿaṣṣuba māniʿun
an tubṣira al-ʿaynu al-ṣawāba

Bigotry blinds the searching eye—
It sees no truth, though truth is nigh.
(Al-Zahāwī, 1: 602-603)

This poetic and polemical voice found an echo in **Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī** (d. 1945), who also attacked rigid customs and challenged the religious sanctity of the veil. In a well-known verse, he laments the imprisonment of women under tradition:

wa-innī la-ashkū ʿādatan fī bilādinā
ramā al-dahru minhā haḍbata al-majdi bi-l-ṣadʿi

I grieve a custom in our land—
That cracked our glory with its hand.

wa-dhālika annā lā tazālu nisāʾunā
taʿīshu bi-jahlin wa-infisālin ʿan al-jamʿi

Our women live in isolation—
Cut off from all participation.

wa-akbaru mā ashkū min al-qawmi annahum
yaʿuddūna tashdīda al-ḥijābi mina al-sharʿi

And worst of all, the people claim—
That veiling's rooted in sacred name.
(Al-Ruṣāfī, 2007, 344.)

Among the prominent advocates of unveiling (*sufūr*) in modern Arabic literature is the renowned Iraqi poet Muḥammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī (d. 1997). In his poem *A Salty Message* (*Risālah Mumallaḥah*, al-Jawāhirī

addresses then-Minister of the Interior Mahdī ʿAmmāsh, reacting to reports that the official had been pursuing and condemning women who wore short skirts (al-Jawāhirī 1998, 527). Through his verses, al-Jawāhirī criticizes this restrictive stance on women's attire and asserts that a woman's chastity lies not in her garments but in her conscience and moral integrity. His poem, composed in *majzūʾ al-kāmil* meter, expresses this idea with biting irony and rhetorical sharpness:

I heard you chase the fashions wide,
With rage and force you vilify,
You track the ones well-dressed with pride,
Like hunters trailing game nearby.

You weigh their skirts, as if a thread
Could prove their morals gone awry—
What's so immoral? Can you tell?
And what, then, does good grace defy?

You—so refined, with gentle hand,
Are closer still to truth and right,
More just than most, you understand,
More honest in your moral fight.

Do you deem virtue woven cloth?
Then you have erred, and deeply so—
For virtue lies in hearts alone,
Not in the dress, nor what it shows.

Whoever fears not conscience' sting
Will fear no law, nor anything.

In this poem, al-Jawāhirī underscores a recurring theme in modernist discourse: **true modesty and virtue are internal values**, not external displays regulated by state control. The poem subverts conventional patriarchal readings by asserting individual morality over imposed morality, especially in matters of female attire.

Another prominent advocate of unveiling (*sufūr*) was the celebrated Egyptian poet and intellectual **Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif** (d. 1918), known by her pen name *Bāḥithat al-Bādiya* ("The Desert Seeker"). In her poem titled *"An Opinion on the Veil"* (*Raʾy fī al-Ḥijāb*), she addresses the issue of women's dress with remarkable clarity and a tone marked by directness and assertiveness. Her verses, written in the *kāmil* meter, reflect a critical view of the veil as a symbol of imposed modesty, arguing instead for a reasoned and enlightened approach to the question of women's visibility and rights in society (*Al-Bābṭīn Encyclopedia*, 2025).

Oh, would I knew—while drinks divide,
From which of roses we must sip inside.

So leave the women to their fate,
Only the troubled know escape from hate.

Before you lies a graver plight,
More urgent than the veil you fight.

Unveiling harms no modest soul,
While veils alone can't make one whole.

Through these lines, Nāṣif emphasizes that a woman's worth is not in how much she conceals, but in her intellect and moral standing—an argument that aligns with broader feminist thought in early 20th-century Arab reform movements.

This position parallels that of **Muḥammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī**, who similarly criticized moral policing in his poem *"A Salty Message"* (Al-Jawāhirī 1998, 527). To summarize the literary stances of those who supported unveiling (*sufūr*), it is important to note that during the era of the Iraqi poet Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī (d. 1936), the veil (*ḥijāb*) was deeply rooted in Arab traditions and widely perceived as a symbol of modesty and propriety. Zahāwī, however, challenged these assumptions, viewing the veil not as a religious obligation but as a relic of social control that impeded women's education and participation in public life. His poetry called for the emancipation of women through unveiling, aligning personal freedom with national progress. Writers like **Marqus Fahmī** and **Qāsim Amīn** echoed similar sentiments, arguing that unveiling was essential to modernity and cultural reform. Their literary voices marked a pivotal turn in Arab thought, where *sufūr* became not only a gender issue, but a **symbolic battlefield** over the identity of the modern Arab subject. However, al-Zahāwī viewed the veil as a significant barrier to women's progress—particularly at a time when the Arab world was increasingly exposed to modern and progressive cultures. In poems such as *"Tear Off the Veil, O Daughter of Iraq"* (*Mazziqī yā Ibnat al-ʿIrāq al-Ḥijāba*) and *"Unveil!"* (*Asfirī*), al-Zahāwī employed impassioned and fiery language to argue that unveiling—meaning the revealing of a woman's face and hair—was essential for progress and civilization. He went so far as to describe the veil as a "**lying guard**," asserting that it gives a false sense of chastity while in reality trapping women in a cycle of backwardness.

Taken together, the voices of poets such as Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī, Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī, Muḥammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī, and Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif (*Bāḥithat al-Bādiya*) reveal a powerful literary front advocating for women's liberation and social reform. Their verses portray *sufūr* not as a moral lapse but as a conscious break from oppressive traditions. Collectively, these poets challenged the assumption that the *ḥijāb* was a prerequisite for virtue, casting it instead as a product of inherited customs that constrained women's potential. Through varying poetic styles—whether Zahāwī's fiery rhetoric, Ruṣāfī's rational critique, al-Jawāhirī's ironic defiance, or Nāṣif's reformist appeals—they all called for freeing women from the symbolic and social burdens imposed upon them. Though controversial in their time, these literary interventions helped shape a reformist discourse that reimagined the role of women in a society striving for progress and modernity.

The Literary Opposition to *Sufūr* (Unveiling)

In contrast to the modernist voices advocating for unveiling, a significant body of literature emerged from writers and poets who defended the veil (*ḥijāb*) and rejected what they viewed as attempts to imitate Western models of womanhood. For these thinkers, the call for *sufūr* signified not progress but moral and spiritual decline. They saw in the unveiling movement a dangerous disruption of social order, a corrosion of religious values, and a distraction from the essential concerns of the Muslim community. According to these authors, the abandonment of modesty led to moral corruption, social disintegration, and the prioritization of sensual pleasures over spiritual and communal obligations.

Among the prominent opponents of *sufūr* was Aḥmad Muḥarram (d. 1945), who viewed the call for unveiling—championed by figures such as Qāsim Amīn (d. 1908)—as a threat graver than foreign military invasion. In a passionate poem, he warns:

> Salām upon the East's pure moral frame,
> If in the veils of honor lies our shame.
>
> O Qāsim! Launch not war against our creed,
> Your every line a wound, your word a blade indeed.
>
> Each verse you write—an ambush unforeseen,
> Each letter strikes—a conquering machine.
> (Muḥarram 1988, 2:63–65)

Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfiʿī (d. 1937) was another towering figure in the literary resistance to unveiling. A fierce defender of traditional values, al-Rāfiʿī opposed *sufūr* both in prose and poetry. In response to the 1915 founding of the journal *al-Sufūr*, he denounced its very name and ideological mission:

> "I am among those who most vehemently condemn the principle behind this journal—namely, the notion of unveiling. May God disgrace those who propagate it! What unveiling do they seek—when even the Prophet's wives, the noblest of all women, were veiled? These individuals do not comprehend their religion, nor its subtleties, nor do they grasp true moral

benefit. The advocates of sufūr—even if they were a hundred writers or poets—are people whose ethics I do not accept." (Al-Rāfiʿī 1950, 57–58)

In his poetry, al-Rāfiʿī condemned what he viewed as the reversal of natural gender roles and moral confusion:

> But ignorance insists—our women turn to men,
> While men, among the nations, grow weak again.
> (Al-Rāfiʿī 1903, 46)

In another poem, he critiques ostentatious display and the dangers of seductive charm:

> Your flaunting grace is lost in false display,
> For modest charm is what led hearts your way.
>
> You bloomed in beauty—yes, but fell from grace,
> When pride and passion veiled your noble face.
>
> For whom do you unveil with such delight?
> It is no sun nor moon that sees your light.
>
> Do you not fear that such a path you tread
> May bless the sin while purity lies dead?
>
> And wolves of lust prowl where your footsteps go,
> Their savage eyes inflamed with every show.
> (cf. al-Rāfiʿī 1950, 57)

Another voice from this tradition is the Egyptian poet **Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib** (d. 1980), who lamented the erosion of modesty and the shift in women's conduct and dress. His tone is elegiac, recalling a lost era of virtue:

> No noble aims in Nile's daughters remain,
> Their conduct now a time's unworthy stain.
> What happened to the veiled and honored bride,
> The matron pure, the nation's modest pride?
>
> Her thin veil torn—her honor swept away,
> A mother's dignity in disarray.
>
> The neckline bare, the elders blush with shame,
> While anklets ring where long gowns once laid claim.
>
> And when she walks, her veil is cast aside,
> Her beauty flaunted, modesty denied.
> (ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib 1900, 184)
>
> He concludes with a grave warning to his people:
> The Nile folk's sight is dimmed and cannot see,
> The clear path lost to blind modernity.
>
> They turned from honor, if they only knew,
> What bitter end such heedlessness will brew.

Also aligned with this traditionalist stance was **ʿAlī al-Ṭanṭāwī** (d. 1999), who devoted multiple essays to the issue of women's modesty. In his short book *Yā Bintī* (*My Daughter*), he directly addressed young Muslim women, denouncing the rhetoric of "liberation" and "progress" as deceitful facades concealing base desires:

> Those who call for equality and mingling in the name of civilization are liars—on two fronts. They lie because their goal is not true emancipation, but to gratify their physical urges and indulge their visual pleasures. Yet they lack the courage to say this outright, so they wrap it in grand-sounding words: progress, art, campus life, sporting spirit, modernity. But it is hollow talk, as empty as a drum. (Al-Ṭanṭāwī, *Yā Bunayyatī*)

These poets and writers, though varied in tone and era, converge in their defense of modesty as an ethical, religious, and cultural imperative. For them, *sufūr* represented a rupture in the moral fabric of society—one that endangered both women and the wider community by eroding the sanctity of family, spirituality, and tradition.

These intellectuals and literary figures further enriched their argument not only through prose but also through carefully crafted, metered, and rhymed poetry. Their verses became a medium of cultural resistance, defending modesty and traditional values against what they saw as intrusive Western models of womanhood and social behavior.

They added that the veil was not a symbol of backwardness, but of dignity, privacy, and cultural identity. In doing so, they challenged the narratives of modernization that equated unveiling with progress. Their poetic voice was not reactionary, but rather reflective of a deep concern over the erosion of ethical and spiritual values.

The Sudanese poet Ḥasīb ʿAlī al-Ḥasīb, for example, rejected the increasing exposure of women's bodies as a form of degradation, using clear and forceful language to denounce the phenomenon as a product of foreign influence. In his poem, he wrote in the *wāfir* meter:

Daʿū fī khidrihā dhāta al-dalāli
Faqad arhaqtumūhā bil-jidāli
Ra'aytu shuʿūrahā al-ḥassāsa muḍnā
ʿAlā hādhā al-jumūdi ʿan al-maʿāli

Leave the modest girl in her chamber of grace,
You've wearied her with endless debate.

I've seen her sensitive spirit drained,
By this harsh retreat from all that's great.
(Al-Muqaddam, 2007, vol. 1, p. 61)

Likewise, Maḥmūd Ghanīm (d. 1972) mourned the increasing exposure of women's attire in his poem *Takashshafa al-ghīd*, composed in *al-baṣīṭ* meter. He criticized modern fashion trends for stripping away modesty and reducing beauty to vulgar display:

Takashshafa al-ghīdu aʿḍādan wa sīqānan
Lam yabqa mustatirun fī al-ghīdi mā bāna
Mā lil-fasātīni fawqa al-rukbati inḥasarat
Famā tarā tahtahā ʿaynāni fustāna?

The maidens now reveal their limbs and thighs,
No part remains concealed from gazing eyes.

What's with the skirts above the knees so tight?
You'd doubt your eyes: is it a dress or slight?
(Ghonaym, 1993, vol. 1, pp. 892–893)

In the same poem, he directly advises young women:

Qul lil-malīḥati: lā takshif mafātinahā
Fa-l-dhawqu yunkiru hādhā al-kashfa nukrāna
Bi-Llāhi, yā fatayāti al-ʿaṣri, qulna lanā:
Azāna abdānakunna al-ʿuryu am shāna?

Tell the fair one: hide what beauty gave,
For taste rejects exposure, not the brave.

By God, O girls of this new age, confess:
Has nudity adorned you—or made less?

These verses underscore the aesthetic and ethical argument that beauty, when modestly veiled, commands greater respect. Ghonaym, like others, lamented the commodification of feminine beauty, asserting that the value of charm diminishes when it becomes too accessible:

Lā yaʿshaq al-ḥusna illā wa-huwa mumtaniʿun
Mā arkhasa al-ḥusna miqdāran idhā dāna!

Beauty is only loved when it is rare,
Its value drops when thrown to every stare.

In conclusion, such literary voices—from ʿAlī al-Ṭanṭāwī in *Ya Bunayyatī* and *Dhikrayāt*, to Maḥmūd Ghonaym, Ḥasīb ʿAlī al-Ḥasīb, and others—represent a coherent cultural front that resisted the trend of unveiling not out of mere conservatism, but in defense of identity, dignity, and moral order. They viewed the veil not as a prison, but as a sanctuary, and saw Western-inspired unveiling as a betrayal of indigenous values and a capitulation to colonial aesthetics.

Their writings, both poetic and prosaic, collectively argue that true liberation is found not in mimicry, but in authenticity; not in exposing the body, but in elevating the soul.

Writers Cautious Toward Unveiling: Between Preservation and Hesitation

A group of modern Arab poets occupies a **tentative and cautious** position regarding the question of **women's unveiling (sufūr)**. Rather than committing explicitly to either the conservative defense of the veil or the liberal promotion of unveiling, these writers navigate a middle path, reflecting the **complex social, political,** and historical contexts of their time. Their literary output reveals a reluctance to fully endorse either camp, often leaving the final judgment to the unfolding of time and experience. Among this group are two of the most distinguished poets in the modern Arabic canon: Aḥmad Shawqī (d. 1932) and Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (d. 1932), whose positions oscillate between support for traditional values and cautious openness to reform.

In his poem composed for a gathering of Egyptian women, Shawqī strongly praises modesty, religious virtue, and adherence to tradition. He exalts the role of mothers, emphasizing their moral station and urging a return to the teachings of scripture and prophetic example. In rhymed *mujzāʾ al-kāmil* meter, he writes:

Rise and salute these noble women fair,
Who walk with grace, in virtue and in prayer.

Lower your gaze in reverence and awe,
For chaste are they, by modesty and law.

Adorn the chambers, and the niche of light,
Mothers are they—of honor and of right.

Take from the Book and Hadith as your guide,
And tread the path the righteous once supplied.
(Shawqī, vol. 1, p. 102)

However, in his later poem *Bayn al-Ḥijāb wa-l-Sufūr* ("Between the Veil and Unveiling"), Shawqī reveals a subtle shift in tone. His stance becomes more nuanced and hesitant, reflecting a sympathy for women's desire for expression, while still maintaining a preference for caution and dignity. He likens the veiled woman to a caged bird, simultaneously acknowledging her beauty and lamenting her confinement:

songful one, O king of melody,
O prince of birds, who sings so tenderly—

I've found in you a Mecca of delight,
Like Maʿbad's voice or Mūṣilī's clear height.
(Shawqī, vol. 1, pp. 176–180)

Here, the poet invokes famous classical singers to underscore the emotional resonance of the voice—a metaphor, perhaps, for the silenced aspirations of women. In this same poem, he touches on philosophical reflections about life's burdens, the ambiguity of experience, and the need for wise endurance. Again in *mujzāʾ al-kāmil*:

The sweetness of life is tinged with gall,
Like colocynth, its taste may bitter fall.

And shackles, even when in gold arranged,
Are still restraints, though finely re-exchanged.

No bird would sing, had people not declared:
He's mad!—so reason taught him to be scared.

Hearken! At times a summary reveals
What lengthy discourse never quite conceals.

Endure the pain, or act if you must strive,
O bird—wise minds in proverbs long survive.

This world will not be kind to one unarmed,
Its blows strike hardest where you're least alarmed.
(*Ibid.*)

In yet another poem, composed for a women's gathering chaired by Huda Shaʿrāwī (d. 1947), Shawqī expresses sympathy for the reformist movement led by Qāsim Amīn, whose writings advocated unveiling. Written after the 1919 revolution—when Shawqī had gained distance from courtly influence and lived in exile—the poem shows a more progressive stance. He laments the emotional turmoil and limitations imposed by the veil, and addresses Amīn directly. He writes:

Tell them—the captive now has grown too strong,
When shall the veiled bird break its silence long?

Its wings are bruised by iron's harsh embrace,
Its legs are bound in silk—a crueler trace.

The veil has drained his patience to the core,
And now unveiling stirs his soul once more.
(Shawqī, vol. 2)

Then, in direct praise of Qāsim Amīn's reform efforts, he continues:

Qāsim, see how thought and feeling move,
Your cause has spread abroad—a noble groove.

Your words now roam the land from east to west,
Like proverbs whispered when the truth is best.

Humanity is just a marching line—
The first steps pass, and others fill the sign.

These lines capture the spirit of social and intellectual evolution, suggesting that progress comes in stages, with one generation building on the gains of the former. Shawqī here reflects a delicate balancing act: affirming values of freedom and reform while never fully rejecting traditional codes. His verse becomes a lens through which to observe the cultural tensions of early twentieth-century Egypt, as poets sought to reconcile heritage with modernity, modesty with freedom, and identity with transformation.

As for Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm, he approached Shawqī in his hesitant stance toward the issue of unveiling (*sufūr*); this hesitation was noted by the critic Aḥmad Amīn (d. 1945), who stated in the introduction to the *Dīwān* of Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm: "One might reproach him for not studying social issues in depth, for not forming his views based on examination and critique. He often escaped stating his opinion, refusing to align himself with either side in the debate on women's freedom or restriction" (Ibrāhīm 1987, 83).

This observation is well illustrated by Shawqī's early and later poetry. In his earlier works, Shawqī clearly praised veiling and championed traditional values. In a poem addressed to a gathering of Egyptian women, he extolled modesty, spiritual purity, and adherence to the path of the Prophet:

Rise up and greet these radiant, noble wives,
Whose grace and piety adorn their lives.

Lower your gaze—such reverence they earn,
For veiled and virtuous, their hearts discern.

They grace the home and sanctify the prayer,
They hold the place of mothers, proud and rare.

Hold to the Book, the Sunnah, and the wise,
And follow life's ordained and trusted ties.
(Shawqī 2012, 1:102)

However, in *Bayn al-Ḥijāb wa-l-Sufūr* ("*Between the Veil and Unveiling*"), Shawqī's position appears more tentative. In this poem, the woman is symbolized as a caged bird—a sympathetic yet cautious image—suggesting internal conflict over the boundaries of tradition and freedom:

Songful King of Melody and Art,
Whose voice enraptures every listening heart,

In you I found my sacred, private shrine—
Like *Maʿbad*'s tunes, or *Mūṣilī*'s divine.
(Shawqī 2012, 1:176–180)

In verses reflecting on human struggle, Shawqī becomes almost philosophical:

The honeyed life is laced with bitter gall,
Its sweetness tainted like the colocynth's fall.

Though chains be forged in gold, they still constrain,
Their gleam no balm for freedom's deep refrain.

No bird would soar unless they'd mock his flight—
I feared their scorn and called it "reason's light."

Learn this: a summary may better show
What lengthy lines of discourse fail to know.
(*Ibid.*)

Shawqī's ambivalence is further revealed in his poem written for a women's gathering chaired by Hudā Shaʿrāwī after the 1919 revolution. Now less constrained by courtly obligations and shaped by exile and introspection, Shawqī voices a hesitant endorsement of unveiling, couched in the imagery of struggle:

They say: the East has lost its other half,

Its women silent in the home's behalf.

But here, the daughters of the Nile arise—
They plant the seeds, their harvest reaching skies.

In darkest days, they stood, a guiding light,
When death would march, they stayed, prepared to fight.

They faced the swords and mounted steeds with grace,
Their armor: faith, and courage on their face.
(Shawqī 2012, 1:122)

He addresses Qāsim Amīn in direct praise for inspiring this intellectual shift:

Qāsim, see how thought begins to rise,
Your cause now travels, swift as proverbs wise.

What starts with one may echo to the last—
Each age inherits truth from ages past.
(Shawqī 2012, 2:166)

Despite such support, Shawqī's work still suggests caution, pleading for measured liberation, not complete dissolution of norms.

Similarly, Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm mirrored this hesitance. While at times warning against *sufūr* and urging women to retain their distinct roles, he also condemned extreme social repression. In one poem, he critiques both excessive veiling and unguarded unveiling:

I do not say: unleash the veils and roam,
With men in markets far away from home.

Nor let them act as men in every part,
Forgetting duties owed with gentle heart.

Nor do I say: impose the chains once more,
Exhausting them with rules they can't ignore.

Your women are not trinkets hid in fear,
Nor lifeless gems that strangers must not near.

They're not possessions locked in chest or drawer,
To decorate your room and nothing more.

Be fair, be just between extremes you take—
Both harsh control and reckless freedom break.
(Shawqī 2012, 1:270)

In his elegy for Qāsim Amīn, Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm addresses the complexities of judgment and historical vindication:

If you held views on veiling, bold yet flawed,
Then prophets too have erred, and none were awed.

Let time be judge—rest now, no need to strive,
For truth unfolds when generations thrive.

If you were right, then yours is noble fame,
You placed the cure where ailment bore its name.
(*Ibid., 2:166*)

His words here emphasize moral restraint and humility in judgment, deferring ultimate truth to the verdict of time.

Elsewhere, Ḥāfiẓ vividly captures the 1919 women's demonstrations, expressing both admiration and critique. He praises their courage, but also warns against unveiling, noting:

> The veiled ones marched, their cause held fast and clear,
> I watched them rally, dignified, sincere.
>
> In black they came—a banner of their pride,
> Like stars that shine through dusk they did not hide.
>
> They walked with grace, their voices firm and bright,
> Their hair revealed, yet veiled with inner light.
>
> But armies surged, and horses charged their line,
> Their swords unsheathed as though to cut their spine.
> (*Ibid., 2:87*)

This poem, rich in contrast, captures the tension between dignity and danger, visibility and vulnerability—a reflection of the wider social anxiety around women's changing roles.

Overall, the vacillating positions of Shawqī and Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm on the veil reflect not merely personal indecision, but a literary and cultural ambivalence rooted in a period of social transition. Their poetry reveals a complex negotiation between tradition and reform, heritage and modernity, echoing the broader ideological currents shaped by figures like Qāsim Amīn and Hudā Shaʿrāwī. Neither poet commits fully to unveiling, yet neither rejects it outright. Their verses, simultaneously celebratory and cautious, stand as poetic testimony to an age caught between the weight of the past and the urgency of the future.

Conclusion

The question of *sufūr* (unveiling) emerged as one of the most hotly debated issues in modern Arab intellectual and literary history. It served as a symbolic terrain upon which deeper conflicts between tradition and modernity, religious heritage and cultural reform, were staged. This literary engagement reflected a broader societal re-evaluation of women's roles and status, particularly during the rise of reformist and cultural movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Arab writers and poets responded to this debate in different, and often conflicting, ways. Some adopted a strong, vocal stance in favor of unveiling. Among the most passionate of these was **Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī**, who viewed the veil as a form of repression and demanded its removal as a necessary step toward women's liberation and national progress. In his iconic poem *"Tear the Veil, Daughter of Iraq,"* al-Zahāwī equated the veil with backwardness, urging women to claim their place in public life. Like him, **Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī** argued that the veil lacked a solid religious basis, framing it instead as a social custom unfit for modern society. Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah (Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif) offered a more nuanced feminist critique, asserting that a woman's virtue lies not in her attire but in her knowledge, ethics, and self-determination.

In contrast, another cohort of writers defended the veil as a religious and moral obligation. **Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfiʿī** emphasized the veil's role as a protective social institution. In his critique of *sufūr*, he wrote that unveiling dismantles the fabric of society and exposes women to moral and social danger. This view was echoed by Aḥmad Muḥarram, who perceived the unveiling movement as a product of Western cultural imperialism, designed to erode Islamic values from within. Maḥmūd Ghonaym, in his poetry, lamented what he considered the spread of immodesty and criticized the social consequences of women's increasingly revealing attire. His verses express alarm at the decline of traditional values and warn of the loss of women's respectability and status. ʿAlī al-Ṭanṭāwī was among the most unyielding voices in this camp. He consistently linked women's moral and spiritual well-being to modesty and adherence to religious dress codes, warning against blind imitation of the West and emphasizing the importance of preserving Eastern identity.

Yet between these two poles stood a third group—those whose positions were marked by hesitation, nuance, or even silence. Among them, **Aḥmad Shawqī** and **Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm** exemplified the ambivalence of their age. Shawqī, in his earlier poetry, upheld traditional values and emphasized the importance of modesty, urging

women to adhere to religious and cultural norms. However, his later work—especially after his exile and exposure to global thought—reveals a softening of this position. His poem *"Bayn al-Ḥijāb wa-l-Sufūr"* compares the veiled woman to a caged bird, suggesting a growing sympathy with calls for moderate reform. His engagement with women's causes, particularly through his support for the pioneering feminist Hudā Shaʿrāwī, reflects a transformation in his social outlook. In one poem honoring a women's gathering after the 1919 revolution, he praised Egyptian women for their courage and contribution to the national struggle, implicitly endorsing their active public presence.

Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm, similarly, neither explicitly supported nor rejected unveiling. Aḥmad Amīn, in his introduction to *Dīwān Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm*, observed that the poet often avoided taking clear stances on controversial social issues. While Ibrāhīm sometimes warned against imitation of men and public exposure, he also urged society not to overburden women with excessive constraints. His poetry reflects both caution and progressive thought. He paid tribute to **Qāsim Amīn**, the pioneering thinker on women's emancipation, acknowledging the significance of his ideas even as he refrained from fully endorsing them. In his poem commemorating the 1919 women's demonstrations, he applauded female protesters for their bravery, yet his tone remained balanced, avoiding any definitive conclusion on the veil.

The selection of these particular writers—poets, thinkers, and public intellectuals—was intentional. They were not passive commentators but active cultural agents, and their literary texts were not neutral artifacts but ideological interventions. Through their poetry and prose, they expressed not only personal convictions but broader collective anxieties and aspirations. Their diversity of thought mirrors the divisions within Arab societies at the time, yet these same writers also helped to shape the contours of those divisions. Their work both reflected and influenced the evolving public discourse on women, identity, and morality.

Some of them—such as al-Zahāwī and al-Ruṣāfī—can be credited with pushing the boundaries of social thought, provoking both support and backlash. Others, like Shawqī and Ibrāhīm, offered readers a space for critical reflection and moral ambiguity, embodying the tension between loyalty to tradition and the pull of reform. In doing so, these figures were not merely responding to societal changes—they were leading them, consciously or otherwise.

By focusing on their varied and evolving positions, this article has sought to demonstrate that the veil in modern Arabic literature is more than a religious or cultural symbol—it is a **site of contested meanings**, a lens through which broader tensions between modernity and tradition are refracted. The poets examined here transformed their literary output into **a field of ethical and ideological struggle**, offering competing visions for the future of Arab society.

Ultimately, the veil in their work becomes not only a marker of gender but a **metaphor for visibility, control, and transformation**. In capturing the anxieties and hopes of their age, these poets helped shape the public's moral imagination. Whether calling for the preservation of sacred values or the reimagining of women's roles, they endowed literature with the power to challenge, persuade, and sometimes even unify.

In sum, this article reveals that literature was not a passive reflection of the times, but a **primary arena in which the Arab modern condition was negotiated**—one poem, one position, and one metaphor at a time.

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